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Commander Zero, Deserted

Further poisoning the well for jailed freedom fighter Eden Pastora, shadowy U.S. agents have told Costa Rica not to offer political asylum to the fabled anti-Sandinista guerrilla leader whose lieutenants were suborned to desert him and who then gave himself up for lack of ammunition, boots and clothes for his troops.

Republicans with close White House ties believe but cannot prove that these agents are tied to local CIA operations, conceivably acting without Reagan administration approval. "It is not possible to prove," a highly knowledgeable insider told us, "but if not the CIA, who could do this?"

What can be stated as fact is that four of Pastora's top guerrilla lieutenants went to a safe house in San Jose early this month. Each received \$5,000 cash to desert Pastora's movement and join the United Nicaraguan Opposition. The payment was personally made by Alfonso Robelo, a key UNO leader.

That tightened the net on Commander Zero, famed throughout Nicaragua for his role in overturning Anastasio Somoza and then defecting from the communist regime established by his revolutionary comrades. Deserted by four of his six commandantes (two refused to leave him) he turned himself in to Costa Rican authorities on May 16.

Only weeks before that tragic series of events, Pastora had been promised by an unofficial U.S. negotiator that he would get immediate help. He was promised ammunition, boots, clothes and a secure communications system in exchange for this pledge: deliver his 2,000-plus guerrillas to a Nicaraguan meeting place with UNO; cooperate with UNO leaders; accept a retired U.S. officer as military adviser to end his movement's organizational troubles.

Even though this arrangement is believed to have had the blessing of Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, it was systematically subverted. Instead of getting what had been pledged, Pastora found his lieutenants suborned, his ability to keep going ruthlessly choked.

This repudiation of a patriot and a political pluralist seemingly violates the Reagan doctrine of support to anti-communist movements.

At least temporarily blocked from asylum in Costa Rica, Pastora finds his movement killed by an unseen hand. A proposal here that he should travel in Europe as a modern-day Minuteman to explain the truth about Nicaragua's communist regime may also be dead. In the shrouded world of freedom fighters acting under the thumb of covert intelligence agents to advance the cause of democracy, Pastora has been hung out to dry.

Costa Rican authorities, urging him to seek asylum in Panama, say that is what the United States wants. "If they send him to Panama," an insider with wide experience in Central America told us, "they are sentencing him to death." The reason: Cuban agents are beginning to overrun Panama.

Here in March, Pastora's hand was warmly shaken by no less than Secretary of State George Shultz. That gesture was seen by U.S. admirers as showing Shultz's support for Pastora.

If so, Shultz has now been overruled by those shadowy on-the-scene U.S. agents who regard Pastora as a troublemaker because he does not play by their rules—and possibly because they know he would not negotiate with the Sandinistas unless he was certain that they could be defeated militarily.

When we saw the anti-Somoza revolutionary leader at one of his jungle headquarters a year ago, the duplicity of Washington-connected political attacks against him was plain. He had been charged with being a mere propagandist who operated only on the Costa Rican side of the border, with hints that he might be in cahoots with the old Sandinista comrades he deserted long ago.

The day we were there, wounded guerrillas were arriving by ramshackle boat in a camp with primitive medical facilities. The crisis he faced was vivid: no ammunition, food or clothing. He had already been frozen out by the CIA and

victimized by grand-scale thievery when his Hughes 500C helicopter was stolen and flown to Costa Rica. It ended up with UNO. The bribe that financed the theft was \$30,000.

Pastora's worsening crisis this spring resulted in a semi-private effort by retired Gen. John Singlaub, backed by congressional conservatives, to rehabilitate him both in the Nicaraguan jungles and with anti-Pastora UNO leaders in the CIA. Just before Easter, Singlaub went to Central America and reached the across-the-board agreement with Pastora. It was accepted by Abrams who, with other officials, believes Pastora's name alone is a priceless asset for the contras throughout Nicaragua.

But in the real world of the Reagan administration, policy operates according to no rules. Although the nominal victim in this tragedy is a single man, the real victim is one of Ronald Reagan's major principles.

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